

SUNDAY TIMES  
BESTSELLING  
AUTHOR

MILLY  
JOHNSON



*The*  
**Accidental  
Rewrite**

The  
Accidental  
Rewrite

A NOVEL

Milly Johnson



HARPER MUSE

*The Accidental Rewrite*

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ISBN 978- (epub)

ISBN 978- (HC)

ISBN 978- (TP)

ISBN 978- (IE)

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

[CIP TO COME]

*Printed in the United States of America*

\$PrintCode

Dedicated to all those authors who write romantic fiction and those readers who love it and keep us in the job. Be as proud to read us as we are to write for you. A story that floods your heart with joy and an ending that leaves you with hope and smiles does not make it inferior to books in other genres. We do not write lesser books.

#RespectRomFic

# Part One

First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they  
fight you, then you win.

—Anonymous



The *Daily Trumpet* would like to point out an error in last Thursday's article which should have featured "Karen's Catering" and not "Karen's Carpenters" as stated. Also, Karen has wished us to point out that she won the Leeds Mayoral dessert of the year award for her Eton Mess, not her Elon Musk.

# *From the Ground Up*

A NOVEL

## Polly Potter

### **Characters**

Sabrina Anderson

Jasper Camward (husband of eight years)

Linnet (daughter)

Rina Anderson (mother)

Ed Anderson (father)

Dick Germany (boss)

Note: Sabrina loves black cherries, espresso coffee, cats, cleaning, and red lipstick.

### **Synopsis**

Sabrina Anderson (35) is a successful Strategy and Operations Consultant who has been sidelined in her job at Flying Falcons for far too long by male bosses who take all the credit for her accomplishments—but no more! A total change is needed in all aspects of her life, starting with ending her desperately unhappy marriage and leaving womanizer Jasper for good. But that won't be easy as Jasper can be volatile and she must plan, act quickly, and take only the barest essentials with

her. She has even told her daughter Linnet, currently touring Australia in the footsteps of her recently deceased Aussie grandparents, not to be in contact with her until given the all-clear to do so because no one knows how far Jasper will go when pushed. Sabrina must get out and flee to pastures new and then begin again in a place where no one knows her, in the old stone cottage she has booked to rent. Will she find her due happiness here? Will she be able to start from scratch and build a career—and herself—from the ground up?

## Chapter 1

*Seven days to the renewal of the vows ceremony*

Being trapped on the big roller coaster at Blackpool, swimming in shark-infested waters while bleeding from a severe paper cut, being sexually compromised by Jeremy Watson at work—these were just a few more favorable alternatives of Polly’s to spending time in a wedding dress shop with her partner’s sister Camay, a woman who made Hyacinth Bucket look understated. Not for her own wedding—that would never be on the cards, at least not now—but Camay’s, or more precisely the renewal of the vows first taken with her husband Ward thirty years ago. Polly hadn’t been on the family scene then, but she’d seen the photos of Camay in a blinding white crinoline looking as if she had just walked off the set of *Gone with the Wind*. Seven bridesmaids in shell-pink satin, a reception at Higher Hoppleton Hall with the Lord Lieutenant as one of the invited guests, more flowers than Kew Gardens. The perfect day, impossible to better; yet for some reason Camay had decided, on a whim, she wanted to do it all again, though on a smaller scale. This time, just the one bridesmaid, and that honor to be bestowed upon her dear brother’s partner.

Camay, who knew as much about fashion as Polly knew about molecular cell biology, had insisted her bridesmaid should be dressed in beige. Not just any beige, but *designer* beige, and had chosen a frock

by a “name” familiar to anyone who sat in the hairdresser’s and read glossy mags: Galina de Jong, the queen of the bridal kaftan. If the frock wasn’t bad enough, Camay had also chosen for her a feathery fascinator in the style of a swan which had been swimming in murky waters and appeared to be attacking her head rather than sitting on it. This shade of beige made magnolia riveting, and when Polly held out her arms, she looked not unlike a blanched flying squirrel. Camay, peering over Polly’s shoulder, was sighing at the reflection in the full-length mirror and seeming to see something Polly wished she could perceive. But then, Camay, as she had come to learn over the years, had always been blinded by a fancy brand name that she could bandy about at every available opportunity: her Louis Vuitton handbag, her Gucci scarf, her Christian Louboutin shoes, not forgetting her fancy BMW.

Camay’s wedding gown was a closely guarded secret. All Polly knew about it was that it was plum. Designer plum, of course, and Ward’s favorite color, apparently. They’d be like plums and cream together, Camay chortled. Except this wasn’t cream; it was the worst kind of beige and it did pale-skinned Polly no favors at all. It was just as well all eyes would be on the bride.

The sales assistant was wearing a name badge that said “Paris” on it. Such a lovely name. Names were so important, thought Polly, who hated hers with a passion. A child had to carry it all their life, and names had powers, both beneficial and detrimental. Paris looked as if she had grown into hers, become pretty and elegant in a way that she might not have if she’d had a name like Polly. Paris was one of those names you couldn’t make fun of, unlike Polly and all those putting-kettles-on witticisms.

“I wish I’d chosen one like this for myself instead of something so fitted,” said Camay, dropping a different sort of sigh now, a regretful one. “One potato too many and I’m liable to pop a button. This shape is perfect for someone carrying a few extra pounds. Covers a multitude of sins.”

Polly tried not to let her indignation show. Okay, she was a couple of stone heavier than her skinny teenage self had been, but she was hardly Mr. Bump. In fact, she had an enviable tiny waist thanks to some lucky family genes, probably on her unknown father's side because her mother had been built like Camay, short and solid with no discernible ins and outs.

"Okay, we're done. Take it off," Camay ordered, giving Polly a little push at her shoulder just in case she'd forgotten where to find the changing cubicle she'd so recently vacated.

Polly couldn't strip it off fast enough. Thank goodness it would all be over soon and she'd never see the photos. Anyone else would have said, "I'm not doing this. Save your money and my pride." But she wasn't anyone else; she was Polly Potter, with a default setting of putting others before herself. She wouldn't ruin Camay's big day. But then, after it was over, it was time to kick against type and put herself first for a change.

Camay's husband Ward was waiting outside for them in his BMW. Camay rarely used the word *car*; she might have done so had she driven an Average Joe vehicle, but she and Ward owned his and hers of the more prestigious models in the BMW range and felt duty-bound to insert the brand into conversation at every available opportunity: *I'll pick you up in the BMW. The BMW is having a service. We've just had the BMW valeted. We're thinking about changing the BMW for another BMW.* Camay Barrett-Hunt especially lived to brag. And the sentiment "I have this and you don't and you never will" underpinned every boast that came out of her mouth. Polly sat in the back with the boxes containing her dress, the fascinator, and shoes. The shoes were actually nice, not that she'd ever wear them again after the wedding. Bunion-makers. Her mum lived in high heels. After she'd died, Polly found over a hundred pairs in her cupboard, no heel less than two inches, most not even worn. Her feet were in a terrible state, but still she had crammed all the bulges and bumps into her fancy shoes.

When they got to Polly's house, Camay and Ward came in with her

because Camay said they hadn't seen Christopher for simply ages. Then again, Polly lived with him and she didn't see him that much either. She'd converted one of the spare rooms upstairs into a den where she could sit and read and do a jigsaw puzzle in peace because he claimed full TV rights in the lounge. They'd become Mr. Downstairs and Mrs. Upstairs, and it wasn't right. It was one of many things that weren't right, that shouldn't have been allowed to develop, but they had and she was way past the point of hoping for change.

This time Polly didn't blush seeing Camay's eyes rove around the house: the hall carpet with the large worn patch in it, the spaces on the kitchen walls where tiles had dropped off, the missing slat in the venetian blinds, the wonky cupboard doors that didn't sit flush. Polly had given up on telling Chris that she'd had enough of the way the house was and was going to get a painter/tiler/floorer to change it only to get the response that she wasn't because it was his house and he wasn't wasting money on having other people do things he could do himself—except he never did because he was always too busy. Annoyingly, though, if his daughter Shauna ever rang up with a DIY “emergency” he was round there with his toolbox like Usain frigging Bolt. It was a relief not to care anymore.

“Tea? Coffee?” Polly offered.

“Do you have Earl Grey?” asked Camay.

“Nope, just good old Yorkshire tea,” replied Polly.

“I'll have coffee,” said Ward.

“Me too then. If instant, I'll take a heaped teaspoon. I like it strong.”

Then Camay added with a titter, “Like my men.”

It was a joke of course. Even Enid Blyton with her vivid imagination wouldn't have applied the adjective *strong* to Ward Hunt. At home he might best be described as a “blundering oaf” who kowtowed to his wife's every demand. At work, in his prestigious banking job, he more than made up for his domestic subjugation by being a misogynistic, condescending bully, if the grapevine was any reliable source of information. Polly knew his type only too well. She was surrounded

by them every single day.

The door from the lounge swung open. “Did I hear the kettle being mentioned?” Polly’s partner Chris made his presence known. He bent down and gave his older sister a kiss on the cheek. He was wearing his lucky Manchester University shirt. He was always in costume for a match, even if he was sitting in the lounge watching it on the TV.

“What’s the score so far?” asked Ward.

“Just finished.” Chris grinned. “Three-nil to us.” He sat down at the kitchen table with the others. “Coffee for me, Pol.”

*Please*, added Polly to herself. However well you knew someone, they were still worthy of manners. Jeremy at work never said thank you for anything either. Maybe it was a male middle-age thing and had an explanatory Greek term like *Manmnesia*. But Chris would have said those two words to a customer, and Jeremy definitely would have said them to Charles the company owner, so it was a deliberate omission not to say them to her. Polly got another mug out of the cupboard and spooned some coffee into it.

“Not long to go now, sis. You must be getting excited,” said Chris.

“Yes, yes, I am rather,” came the reply.

Polly put a plate of biscuits down on the table and Ward’s hand shot out to pick up two at once. Polly often wondered whether, if someone were to cut through Ward Hunt, they’d find *Greed* written through the middle of him like a stick of Blackpool rock. In the time she’d known him, he had grown a little more bloated every year on executive lunches and fine dining until he was this walking barrel of a man, but the greed extended far beyond his gastronomic excesses. He had the perfect partner in Camay, a pair of coveters who had to have the biggest and best and most of everything. They likened themselves to the “Joneses,” who set the standard lesser mortals could only aspire to keep up with.

“Are you looking forward to your big day, Ward?” asked Polly, distributing coffees.

“I suppose so,” he replied.

“Of course he is,” said Camay. “How could he not be, marrying me all over again? And then having a wonderful feast at Maltstone Old Hall.” She gave him a poke and his default grumble-face broke into a smile of delight.

“What menu have you chosen for the reception?” asked Polly, leaning against the sink because there wasn’t a spare chair for her. The fourth one had broken months ago. She and Chris were supposed to be going to choose a new dining set, but like everything else he’d promised, it hadn’t happened.

“Italian bruschetta for starter, fillet of lamb served pink, something with goat’s cheese for the vegetarians, I forget what”—Camay flapped her hand in such a way that showed her disdain for anyone awkward enough not to eat meat—“Chocolate fudge cake or crème brûlée for dessert.” She pronounced the “crème” as if she were clearing a pint of phlegm from the back of her throat.

“Did you really need three courses?” asked Chris, who was the total opposite to his sister in his spending habits. His tone was as tight as if he was footing the bill himself.

“Five. There’s cheese and coffee as well,” said Camay. “One must do these things right, Christopher. If you’re going to have just a select few present, they should have a select menu to match.”

“I love lamb,” said Ward, spitting out biscuit crumbs as he talked. He ate very noisily always, his jaw clicking.

“Oh god, look at you,” said Camay, taking a handkerchief out of her bag, spitting on it, and then reaching over to dab at a blob of chocolate on his shirt.

He tapped her hand away and said, “Leave it for the housekeeper.”

“You have a housekeeper now?” asked Chris, eyebrows raised.

“Well, we had to get one. I simply haven’t got the time to maintain a five-bedroom house with three reception rooms myself. She’s live-out, of course, but she’s very good.” Camay’s eyes dragged from one side of the kitchen to the other. “She’d clean this place up so much you wouldn’t recognize it.”

Polly felt a growl in the back of her throat. The house was spotless, even though Chris was untidy and could make it look like a trash heap five minutes after she'd cleaned it. He left all that domestic stuff to Polly because it wasn't fair he did housework as well as all the hours he did in his garage, he'd say. In a police lineup, he couldn't have picked out an iron in the middle of a row of mops.

Polly remembered what this house was like when she moved in. There was more fur on the skirting boards than there was on next door's five Persian cats. Once again the idea of a tiny flat or house with just her own mess to contend with made something warm swell up inside her. Maybe she'd find the sort of little cottage that featured in her novel-in-progress, with its old stone walls and doorway framed with sweet-scented flowers. She'd be happy there, she knew she would. She couldn't wait. She couldn't wait for this wedding to be over; she couldn't wait to be alone.

"She's made our porcelain sparkle. Our bidets look like brand new again," went on Camay, lifting the mug to her mouth with her little finger stuck out like a countess. As always when she was in Camay's company, Polly reaped some killer lines that were the equivalent of gold dust for her creative writing assignments. Polly wondered if that was what professional novelists did: harvest conversations. She'd never be a Catherine Cookson, she didn't want to be, but she did enjoy being imaginative and it was marvelously cathartic to put the world to rights on paper. Her hobby had been a lifesaver this past year. She felt as if she were a god in her own world, a parallel universe where karma was her chief of staff; where people got full credit for what they did and all the notable knob-heads got their comeuppances.

"Waste of money, weddings, if you ask me," said Ward, jaw clicking as he crunched. "All that moolah spent on other people."

"Shut up, Ward," said Camay. "Don't pretend you aren't looking forward to it." There was a threat in her tone. Polly knew he wouldn't dare look anything less than euphoric on the day, whatever he felt.

"I like your mug," Camay commented then, smiling at her brother

as he glugged his coffee. “‘World’s Best Dad.’ Shauna or William?”

“Birthday present from Shauna,” said Chris. His daughter liked all that sort of tat. There was a “World’s Greatest Daddy” trophy on a shelf in the lounge and a “My Wonderful Dad” tea towel in the drawer. There were no matching “World’s Best Stepnum” pieces for Polly; Shauna never even sent a card. Chris’s son Will, however, unlike his sister, never missed. He’d been thirteen when Polly came into their lives, and that first Christmas he’d bought her a brooch. Chris had made a joke about it, calling it an old-lady present in front of his son, and so Polly had said, to undo the damage, that she loved a brooch but no one ever bought them for her. It became a thing; Will had bought her a brooch every birthday and every Christmas since, and she kept them in a treasure box. And sometimes, when the occasion demanded, she took them out and wore them. It said something that all the brooches were now in her handbag, ready for her to take with her on Sunday.

“How is Shauna?” asked Ward.

“Very well,” replied Chris. “She loves her new job.”

Of course she did—she worked in the social security office, deciding who received benefits and who didn’t. Polly could imagine her in a Colosseum-shaped office, turning her thumb up and down like a female Caligula.

“What about William?” asked Camay.

“He’s all right. He’s doing some admin or something,” said Chris. He’d never shown the same interest in his son as he had his daughter, which was a crying shame because Will was a much nicer person and the only one of them Polly would miss when she left.

“It will be good to see them at the wedding,” said Camay, then she clicked her attention away from him and onto Polly. “Before I forget, the hair and makeup woman will be here at nine on Saturday.”

Polly raised her eyebrows in surprise. “A hair and makeup woman? For me?”

“Yes, of course for you,” chuckled Camay as if Polly were daft. “I’ve

briefed her on what to do with you. So wash your hair, leave it damp, she'll do the rest. The car will be picking you up at eleven thirty-five. Chris will be staying with us the night before. He and Ward are going to have a few drinkies to celebrate. A mini stag do."

It was the first Polly had heard of it.

"Right then, we're all sorted." Camay stood. "Ward, are you ready?" Ward whipped the last biscuit from the plate as he got up. Polly and Chris saw them out. On the drive, Camay gave her brother an affectionate hug and planted a real kiss on his cheek, then turned to Polly for her usual double air kiss near her ears. Ward didn't do kisses; Polly was grateful for that. It would have been like being slobbered over by a walrus.

Back inside, Chris went to the cupboard to get a Jaffa Cake only to discover that there were none left.

"Did you have to put them all out, Pol? You know what bloody Jabba's like." Chris's pet name for his brother-in-law was Jabba the Hunt. "Bugger. And no chocolate crumbles either."

"I didn't think he'd clear them all single-handedly," replied Polly.

"Greedy twat," said Chris, having to make do with a digestive. "I hate these." He was grimacing as he crunched. He looked like a recalcitrant toddler. "Next time, don't give Jabba my Jaffa Cakes," he added, reaching for another of the biscuits he hated.

*The next time Jabba and his missus come round to the house, I won't be the one making the coffee and putting out any biscuits,* Polly thought.

Chris huffed a bit more and chuntered under his breath and then said, "I should have told you about me staying at Camay's on Friday night. I forgot."

Polly carried on wiping down the table with a cloth.

"It's fine," she said. It couldn't have been more perfect in fact. A whole clear evening to pack and take her time about it. For a full month now, she'd been getting rid of what she no longer wanted in her cupboards and the loft, and organizing what she would take with her so she could just sweep it all up and throw it quickly into suitcases.

She was banking on Chris being out for the count on Saturday night, and that's when she was going to do the bulk of her packing, quietly, when he was asleep. This arrangement would make everything so much easier. She knew that when she told him she was leaving, he wouldn't be assisting her out with her things and waving her off with a cheery "bye-bye," because he didn't take rejection very lightly. He'd still been dragging a massive bag of luggage around with him when they met—and he'd been divorced for five years by then. Although, Charlene Barrett had given him chlamydia, contracted from her sister's husband whom she'd subsequently married. Polly wouldn't be leaving him for anyone else; she didn't want to cause him pain, she just wanted to go and be out of pain herself.

Polly felt Chris's eyes on her, and when she lifted her head, it was to find him staring at her.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm okay," he replied, then turned and went into the lounge to watch some more sport.

The *Daily Trumpet* would like to apologize to Sue Dyer of Sue's Hair and Beauty for the advertisement that appeared in Sunday's "Treat Yourself" supplement. We inadvertently printed "book early to avoid appointments" when it should of read, "book early to ensure disappointments."

## Chapter 2

*Five days to the renewal of the vows ceremony*

// Polly, put the kettle on,” said Jeremy, popping his head out of his office door. He grinned as if this was the first time he’d ever said it and not the millionth. He truly was a man of astounding wit. Or at least something rhyming with it.

Sheridan, the office administrator and fourteen years Polly’s junior, made a move to get out of her seat.

“I’ll do it,” she said, uttering “wanker” under her breath, as if it was the first time she’d ever said it and not the millionth.

“No, you won’t,” said Polly. “You shouldn’t even be working, never mind running around making coffees.”

“You do it and I’ll never speak to you again,” said Sheridan, using her scary do-not-mess-with-me voice. “I need to rub my bum and I can do that in the privacy of the kitchen. Kill two birds with one stone. Bloody sciatica.”

She levered her heavily pregnant body from her chair and waddled off in the direction of the small kitchen. Polly would miss working with this young breath of fresh air when she went on maternity leave, and she’d been selfishly glad that Sheridan had decided to work as near to her due date as possible so she could have maximum time with her new baby. Sheridan’s maternity cover had already been decided

upon. His name was Brock Harrison and he was the business owner's nephew. Polly had already met him and he was exactly the entitled spoiled brat she'd expected him to be. She could forecast what was to come. Like Jeremy, he'd start off as her junior, he'd learn just a little before he began to act like her senior, and long before he was ready that was exactly what he would be because the male hierarchy would move to promote him above her—and in no time at all, he'd be popping his head out of his office and also asking Polly to put the kettle on.

Sheridan was just emerging from the kitchen with the coffee when the owner of the company, Charles Butler, breezed into the department, speedwalking across the executive red carpet toward Jeremy's office. If Sheridan hadn't made an emergency step backward, both of them would have been splattered in milk froth.

Sheridan followed Charles into Jeremy's inner sanctum. Polly knew she would take as long as possible to deliver the drink and plate of biscuits so she could mop up any gossip and bring it back to her seat. Sure enough, she was wearing a knowing grin on her face when she returned and couldn't wait to lean over the partition that separated their workspaces to share what she'd just overheard.

"You should see the backslapping going on in there, and the handshaking," Sheridan said. "It's all to do with Nutbush's profits. Apparently they are through the roof." Her brow creased then. "I wonder if they'll call you in, Pol, and start thumping you on the back as well, seeing as that was all down to you."

"Let me see," said Polly, tapping her lip with her finger. "I think I have more chance of Leonardo DiCaprio abseiling down the side of the building in the next five minutes, climbing in through the window, and handing me a box of rose and violet creams."

"What are they?" asked Sheridan. "Chocolates? They sound vile." She wrinkled up her nose at the thought of a flower and chocolate combo.

"Don't knock 'em till you've tried them. My uncle used to buy them

for my auntie and whenever I went to visit, I could choose one from the box.” She smiled at the thought. She always smiled at thoughts of her uncle Ed and auntie Rina. She didn’t have a lot of happy memories of her childhood, but the ones featuring them shone bright. A year of warmth and fun and love. Then they were gone and there were no more violet or rose creams or games of Snakes and Ladders or trips out to fairs and the seaside and museums or overflowing buckets of popcorn at the cinema.

“You do know why your star hasn’t reached its full ascendancy here of course,” said Sheridan.

Polly did, but she humored her young friend. “Go on, enlighten me.”

“You’re lacking a dick. Two actually. One in your pants and another growing out of your head.”

Polly gave a small laugh, even though it was no laughing matter, because here they were again, same scenario, different company. A business in trouble seeking their help, Polly presenting her best ideas to the panel on how to turn them around. Polly’s ideas getting nicked and repackaged, others taking the credit for the success. Polly forgotten.

“Next time you get a company to rescue, feed the buggers a load of duff info and watch them crash and burn and then stand back and let Germany take the credit for that,” said Sheridan, using one of her many nicknames for Jeremy. She rocked on her seat to get comfortable. “I know, I know, before you start on me. You aren’t like that.”

Polly wasn’t. Many of the businesses that came to them at Northern Eagles were desperate enough to invest in their expertise. Old family firms that had no idea how to adjust to suit present markets, or fledgling businesses that had plowed everything they had into their dreams and badly needed guidance. People’s livelihoods were at stake, their health as well as their money. She’d felt pride when it was her ideas that had been adopted and made the difference; she still did, but ever since the new regime began, just over two years ago, not once had she

been given true recognition for what she'd achieved, even though the honors had been handed out too readily to those who had done so little to earn them. She hadn't a clue what she was going to do about it going forward, but she was going to do something. On Sunday, a new phase of her life would begin, and she hoped that her newfound freedom would give her the confidence to make changes for herself at work as well as at home. And she'd have a woman called Sabrina to thank for it: a character she had invented in her writing class. Sabrina was everything Polly aspired to be, a new creature springing up from the ashes of her old self, like a brilliant phoenix, no longer happy with her lot and ready to alter things. It was beyond bonkers that Polly found herself stirred by a person who didn't exist that she'd conjured up from her own head and yet who was showing her the way forward. Fictional Sabrina was leaving her cheating shit of a husband Jasper because it was the right thing to do to save herself, and Real Polly was primed to follow in her footsteps.

"Oh you little sod, behave," said Sheridan to her stomach. "I'm as tight as a drum. Braxton Hicks contractions. To be fair, they don't hurt; it's just your body tuning up for delivery."

Polly knew what they were. "Can I feel?" she asked.

"Course," said Sheridan.

Polly walked round to Sheridan's side. She placed her hand on her bump, felt the shifting underneath her palm. She closed her eyes and remembered how it was to have a small life growing inside so close to her heart.

"This time next month you'll be holding him," said Polly, removing her hand long before she wanted to.

"And then my stomach will be the equivalent of a deflated balloon." Sheridan sighed. "Just as well I'm going to fill it up with another one as soon as I can."

She had it all planned out. She'd come back to work for a bit and then get pregnant again and leave permanently to be a hands-on mum. Her husband Dmitri was ten years older and a scientist earning

a packet, not that Sheridan ever showed off about their financial status. The only things she liked to show off about were her latest bargain finds from discount shops. She and Polly had a thing that they could only buy each other birthday and Christmas presents from the pound shop.

“So what did you do at the weekend?” asked Sheridan, throwing over a packet of chewy toffees. Polly took one and threw it back. They called this “confectionery tennis.” They did a lot of daft things to offset the frustrations of working in this patriarchal black hole.

“Final check on my bridesmaid dress.”

“Oh yes, the *dress*,” said Sheridan, giving the word a weight all of its own as she held up two fingers arranged as a crucifix. “And does it still fit?”

“That’s the problem. It would fit me and half the guests. Look, I took a photo of the whole ensemble for you in the changing room.” Polly fished her phone out of her bag, found the picture, and then handed it over the partition.

“Fuck me, it’s worse than I imagined,” said Sheridan, when she realized her eyes weren’t deceiving her. “To be fair, it would probably look okay on Harry Styles.”

“Everything looks okay on Harry Styles,” returned Polly. “And what for the love of god is that on your head? It looks like a mucky swan.”

“It’s a fascinator.”

“Why does your sister-in-law hate you so much?”

Polly laughed at that. Camay didn’t hate her, even though she would very shortly. Camay viewed her as a mere extension of her beloved brother and as such had never bothered to grow fond of her as a separate entity. Polly had always wanted to embrace Chris’s family as her own, but his daughter was devious and his sister an inveterate showoff whom it was hard to warm to. Polly was under no illusions: Camay hadn’t insisted she be the bridesmaid because they were close—Camay had all her ladies’ group cronies for friendship. There had to be another reason, though Polly couldn’t for the life of her work

out what it was.

“In Camay’s eyes, if a price tag is hefty and the designer is well-known, a garment cannot possibly be awful. It’s out of the question.”

“You have far too nice a figure for that . . . sack, Polly. I mean, why hasn’t she chosen something for you that goes in at the middle and shows off that lovely small waist you have?” Sheridan crossed her arms as if she meant business. “I reckon she’s jealous.”

“I don’t think so.” Polly refuted that. She wasn’t the sort that Camay would envy. She might be if she owned a wardrobe full of Victoria Beckham outfits. Or was tall and willowy like a catwalk model so that everything she wore looked fabulous on her. As it was, Polly was neither tall nor short, neither fat nor thin, with mid-brown, mid-length, poker-straight hair. Once upon a time, though, her tawny eyes shone and she had a smile that could light up a whole city, someone kind had said. The only beauty contest she’d ever have a chance of winning now would be Miss Average Great Britain.

“It’s just one day, half a day really, I suppose. I can cope with wearing it for that long,” said Polly. “Then I’ll gladly take it off and”—*walk away from them all*—“Put it in a charity bag.”

She had so wanted to share what she’d been planning with someone, and if Sheridan hadn’t been pregnant, that’s who she would have confided in; but she couldn’t offload all that onto her, especially now when the bun in her oven was almost fully baked. She had to be strong for herself, something she should have been long before this.

“Are they having a honeymoon?”

“Apparently so, but she says it’s top secret. It’ll be somewhere exotic no doubt.”

“Benidorm?”

“Ha. I’d put my life savings on it not being.”

“I love Benidorm,” said Sheridan. “I’ve had a lot of fun there, both with pals and Dmitri.”

“Me too.” Polly remembered getting off the plane at Alicante and feeling the blast of hot air almost knock her backward. She’d gone

with mates whom she wasn't in touch with anymore. Her first ever trip abroad. It was sensory overload. They'd come home with all the souvenir tat, the Spanish dancer doll, the castanets, the fan, the big furry donkey. And thanks to a young handsome Spanish waiter and a split condom, Polly brought home an extra souvenir she didn't know about until two months later.

"So who had the affair then, him or her?" asked Sheridan.

Polly stared at her incredulously. "What do you mean?"

"Well, isn't it a thing, that people who have almost buggered up their marriage decide to wipe the slate clean and start again with the vows they've just smashed into smithereens?"

Neither Camay nor Ward was the affair type. He wheezed getting out of a chair; humping some young thing would definitely be beyond his capabilities. Plus, Camay wouldn't allow it. And she would never risk being parted from his pension prospects for an extramarital fling of her own. Unless it was with Richard Branson.

"Maybe, but not in their case," replied Polly. "They're solid as a pair of rocks."

"Seems like a right old waste of money to me then," said Sheridan.

"They have it to burn," said Polly. Camay's plum satin wedding gown and Polly's shapeless beige bridesmaid bag, the cars, the champagne, the hair and makeup woman and pink lamb main course wouldn't even make a dent in their savings.

"I'd love to be super rich, wouldn't you, Pol?" Sheridan sighed wistfully.

Polly nodded. "Of course," she said, knowing that she was going to be *super poor* for the foreseeable future, at least moneywise. Her wealth would be in the form of freedom, and she planned on spending it liberally.

Just after lunch Jeremy bobbed his head out of his office, not to ask for a drink for once, but for Polly to pop in. She followed him and he closed the door behind them and asked her to sit. He plonked himself in his leather swivelly executive chair behind his desk and smiled.

“I wanted to fill you in about Nutbush,” he said with a smile so greasy it was a wonder it didn’t slide off his lips. She noticed how deliberately he spoke, as if choosing every word with care.

“Okay,” replied Polly, not giving away that she’d heard the good news already.

“You’ll be delighted to hear that they are on the steepest of upward trajectories.”

“That’s wonderful,” replied Polly. “I knew they would be.”

“Suffice to say that they are extremely glad they reached out to us at Northern Eagles.”

“Great stuff,” said Polly, nodding.

“I’m aware this was initially your client,” Jeremy went on. “And you did an admirable job of pointing their ship in the right direction.”

It was a slight understatement. Nutbush was a sports company on the brink of receivership. They had a lot of competition in the market, both bargain stores and high-end, and they didn’t offer enough to divert custom from either. Polly had gone out to visit them and found their shops a mess. But not beyond hope, *never* beyond; her old boss Alan had trained her to see that there was always that, if they were prepared to listen to expert advice. There was nothing that couldn’t be spun around; it was just finding the right combination for the safe holding the treasure, as Alan used to say. And when she did find it, the Nutbush file was whipped from her with the alacrity of a champion greyhound on amphetamines.

“I wanted to formally acknowledge your input,” Jeremy went on, pressing his hands together and doing that thank-you gesture that gave her the ick. “I know it was hard at first to get them to accept the changes we suggested, so well done on that.”

*We.* Polly laughed inwardly.

“But I must give you credit where it is due, Polly—you were able to get through to them that ours was the path they should follow. Pretty basic stuff of course, but nonetheless . . . good show.”

It wasn’t basic stuff at all. It was a massive gamble. Every other

business was closing stores and upping their online trading, and that was what Jeremy and his team had expected her to suggest. But Polly's instinct was to do exactly the opposite and expand their high street presence in areas where they were strong, in towns being regenerated where planners wanted to lure people away from their computers to shop in person. She had the vision of making Nutbush a seductive space to wander around. She wanted to make it cool to shop there and deliver an impact that couldn't be felt online. She spent a lot of hours visiting their stores to absorb what the problem with them was, who shopped there now, who might shop there in the future. The fixes she suggested raised eyebrows, but they worked. Retro music pumping through the speakers, less stock on the floor so it looked cleaner with more space, lowered ceilings, warmer lighting instead of the harsh bright white, even a change of coat hanger. Then she discovered there was a premiership footballer by the name of Cedric Nutbush. She wormed her way around his PR. Did he want to help out an ailing sports firm, set up by a young man who'd had a promising football career until a car crash shattered his leg? An inspiration to young kids that there wasn't just one road to success? Could they use his image (for the price of a hefty donation to his underprivileged kids' charity) and the slogan 'Nutmush. No Limits'? Cedric Nutbush went for it and the whole combo worked like magic.

And Polly wasn't even invited to the reopening of their flagship store in Manchester, although Jeremy and his merry band of male managers were. The photo of them, Cedric, and the Nutbush founder ended up in all the national papers. That weekend she took the train to Manchester Piccadilly, walked around the shop, felt the vibe, saw the length of the queue at the till, and felt a massive sense of pride, albeit tainted with some rightful anger and frustration. Her old boss Alan Eagleton would have put her on a pedestal for what she'd done for them, not shoved her in a cupboard out of sight.

"The company owes you," said Jeremy, jabbing his long, thin finger at her. Everything about Jeremy was long and thin: his nose, his chin,

his legs, his fingers. He'd have long slim feet with elongated toes as well, she just knew, though her imagination forbade her from going any further than that. "I've had a word with HR and we are upping your salary by a thousand pounds. So what do you think about that?" He beamed. Jeremy beaming was not a good look because his mouth turned into a deranged V shape.

*What do I think about that?* Polly mused. She could imagine Alan sitting at the desk Jeremy now occupied raising his shaggy eyebrows and urging her to tell him to stick that grand up his arse, one fiver at a time.

"Good, good." Jeremy didn't wait for her answer but picked up a file from his desk and handed it to her. "Knew you'd be thrilled. Now, if you could take a look at this. You won't have heard of them and that's the point. They have a big budget to spend on improvements. If anyone can make them into the next Warburtons, you can." He stood, signifying their meeting was at an end. He was still smiling, in the way the pope would smile having granted a poor person a blessing.

"What's up, Pol?" said Sheridan when Polly returned and threw herself down on her seat. "Your cheeks are very red."

"I'm cross, that's what I am," said Polly. "Cross enough to storm out of this damned building and never come back."

Jeremy's V-shaped lips were branded on her brain. V for the victory he'd claimed for doing nothing other than regurgitate her ideas, her suggestions, and then he'd had the nerve to fling her a bit of icing from his celebratory cake.

"I've just typed up a letter from Germy for HR. Is it—"

Polly held up her hand to stop Sheridan from saying any more. Her heart was racing, her head full of words unsaid. She'd taken two years' worth of crap from him now, and it was enough. She really did need to be *more Sabrina*. She couldn't wait for her effect to kick in.

During her lunch hour, Polly took the folder Jeremy had given her into the canteen and sat in the corner with it. Confusingly it had "Auntie Marian's Bread" on the front, but inside was a brief pertaining to a

very different company—a burgeoning Italian restaurant chain called Ciaoissimo. She unwrapped her sandwich and chewed half-heartedly on it. The catering in this place used to be top-notch, but company cuts had led to detrimental changes. Alan Eagleton was always of the belief that an army marches on its stomach and quality scran was an essential. But then, there was a chasm between the sort of man Alan was and the sort Jeremy was that made the Grand Canyon look like a crack in a pavement.

With an absence of anything else to occupy her, she started to read about Ciaoissimo: *Authentically Italian* it cried, even though it was about as authentically Italian as Bjork.

No wonder they'd asked for help. High staff turnover, low morale, lack of vision, crazy menu, and their mission statement seemed to be "Get the money off the customers, feed them crap, and chuck them out." Negligible number of repeat customers—*no shit, Sherlock*. They were a mess. She opened up an envelope in the back marked *Strictly Confidential* and didn't like what she found there. She hoped this one landed on someone else's pile; otherwise she might actually be tempted to cock it up.

\* \* \*

She took the folder back to Jeremy after lunch.

"Ah, straight on it, Polly Kettle; that's what I like to see," he said.

"Well, I would have been had the outside matched the inside," she replied, bristling at the stupid name Jeremy insisted on calling her. She bet he didn't call Jack Jones, the head of Finance, "Jack Spratty"; or Marjorie Wright, the head of HR, "See Saw Marjorie Daw." Mind you, with good reason, because Marjorie would have had his balls off. She was fierce but fair: Fools were not to be suffered. Polly had always really liked her no-nonsense approach, and there was too much nonsense in Northern Eagles now. Marjorie was part of the old guard, most of whom had been dispensed with when the company was sold

and the new guard came in. Two of her particular favorites had been driven out: Phil Bowery, one of Alan's brightest protégés, and Dave Deacon, a young graduate with a real nose for business. They went to the wall because Charles Butler wanted his own people in, even if they were inferior. Marjorie escaped the firing squad probably because she was female and less of a threat, but she was drafted over from the directorate to Human Resources out of the way.

Polly answered Jeremy's confused, inquiring expression. "The outside says Auntie Marian's Bread; inside there's a business profile of an Italian restaurant chain called Ciaoissimo, not a mention of a teacake to be found," she explained.

"Ah. Not sure how that happened. Just forget about this one; it needs expert handling." Jeremy opened up the big drawer in his desk and dropped the folder in there quickly. "I'll have the proper file brought over to you."

*Interesting*, thought Polly on the way out, wondering why Ciaoissimo should be classified. Anyway, let one of Jeremy's "experts" deal with it. No doubt he'd run into difficulty and need her input, so it would end up with her eventually anyway. That's what usually happened.

## DREAM TRIP FOR GRANNY

The family of May Readman surprised her with a party in her local pub, The Lobster Pot in Whitby, on her ninetieth birthday and a ticket for a fully-paid-for trip to Dignitas. Son Philip said, “We can’t wait for Mum to go there; we’ve been wanting to send her there for ages. Everyone was more than happy to chip in and we’ll be delighted to wave her off.”

## Chapter 3

Polly hated lying. Lies hurt people, lies made holes in trust that could never quite be sealed up again; this she knew only too well. But she allowed herself to lie once a week, and though it was quite an innocent lie, she still felt a bit bad about it. Every Monday she left work early and drove straight to the church hall in Millspring, a village near her home in Penistone, for a creative writing class, and she hadn't missed a single one since she joined.

She had pretended she had to work late on Mondays for over ten months now, not that it inconvenienced Chris because he was never in before her on that night anyway. He kept open longer hours on Mondays and Tuesdays for emergency jobs and those willing to stump up extra to queue-jump. Those two days were proper money-spinners for him.

Chris had his own body shop garage. He was good at what he did and in much demand, and his charges reflected that because people paid him a small fortune to suck out the dents and touch up the imperfections in their prestige cars. That's where he'd met *her*: Mrs. Jones, the "seven-year itch," he called it, as if it was somehow out of his control, possibly even medical.

On the first day of April (*ha!*) last year, Polly found out about the affair and she'd left him, moved into the first Airbnb she could find that was available. And in the four weeks when they were apart, she

started writing down her feelings and found it helped. Sometimes she wrote prose, sometimes her words bent to poetry; both formats took her out of the zone. She hadn't written creatively since she'd been at school and had no idea why she turned to a pen instead of a bottle of wine, but she rediscovered the pleasure of spilling her innermost thoughts out onto paper. Poetry helped put her emotions into a manageable framework; story-writing allowed her to climb into the skin of characters, walk in their footsteps, and find some sadly lacking control. Being in charge of a fictitious world helped her deal with a real world in which she had been flattened. Then she joined the Mill-spring Quillers, which had turned out to be her salvation. Sometimes they wrote haiku, or limericks for light relief. One week they'd had an assignment to make a shopping list sexy; they'd even done a letter to an imaginary lover, an exercise in subverting any intrinsic decent values they might have to release a deceptive, self-serving side of themselves, which was pretty ironic given how she'd come to be part of the group. Now they were working through the planning of a novel—the characters, the setting, the dialogue, the plot, the story arc—as an exercise.

She didn't tell Chris about her classes because once, not long after they'd gotten back together, she'd walked in on him and his daughter Shauna reading her "Ode to Old Tom" in her notepad and laughing uncontrollably. Admittedly Simon Armitage wouldn't have felt threatened, but it was a highly personal piece about a cat she'd once been fond of, and she'd poured her heart into it. Their scorn burned her, humiliated her, and when Shauna had gone home, Polly had taken him to task about it. But Chris was politician-skilled at spinning things on their heads, and managed to make her into the bad guy because she couldn't take a joke. So she went underground after that, hiding her creative work out of sight. And she was glad that she'd heeded her intuition not to tell him about the classes because he'd have put her off or scoffed because he never could see how people got so much enjoyment out of the written word.

Polly found the book project really exciting. In her story she had even reimagined some of her life to bring her comfort. Her uncle Ed and auntie Rina featured as Sabrina's parents, and though gone now, they had enjoyed a long, happy life. Her daughter Linnet was working her way around Australia, having safe and exciting adventures, doing all the things Polly would have wished for her. Polly liked to imagine that as a young adult she was pretty and petite with sun-kissed skin, dark hair, and a voice like a song. Even Tom the cat from next door was in it, and the house Sabrina was escaping to was the cottage her uncle and auntie had rented in real life until they could find one they liked as much to buy. It was bittersweet to write about her lost loved ones, but she found more solace than pain in the exercises.

In her story Sabrina had been pushed too far at work and pushed too far in her marriage. Sabrina was based on herself, but she was much more confident and kickass. Jasper had his womanizing roots in Chris, but he was far nastier, more volatile and toxic. Sabrina was excited about the prospect of being single again. So was Polly, but Sabrina didn't wake up sometimes in a cold sweat worrying about the logistics of breaking free. But both writer and character were united in the knowledge that cutting loose was their only option.

Polly hadn't a clue how Chris was going to take it when she said that she was leaving him, because she knew he thought that everything in the garden was lovely, and it probably was from his side of things. He was looking at flower-filled borders and a verdant green lawn, and all she could see was a barren wasteland; all the seeds and bulbs she'd planted hoping they would grow lay rotten under the surface of the soil.

In hindsight, the damage had been done long before his affair, but the affair shone the harsh light on the truth of her relationship, and she saw it now fully exposed. That it was the worst kind of loneliness, to feel alone when you were with someone, and how tiny scraps of shrapnel could do as much harm as big thunderous bullets, even though you barely felt them at the time. Little things that on their own

didn't amount to much, but once lumped together made a huge ugly insurmountable mound: never saying thank you to her, taking her for granted, not allowing her to get someone in to put new tiles up or a new carpet down, rolling his eyes at her with exasperation if she told him to shove his dirty clothes in the wash basket instead of dropping them at the side of it, leaving his work bag in a place where she'd always have to shift it. His lack of consideration, his obliviousness to her needs had chipped away at her love but also her self-esteem. She'd been so battered and bewildered, so reduced after the affair with Mrs. Jones, that she didn't know if she'd taken him back more to salve her ego or because she really loved him, though it felt like the latter then. She'd wanted to believe his promises that he'd do what it took to get them back on track. In the first few weeks he tried. He'd even rustled up a couple of meals—pasta in jarred sauce—and had letterbox flowers sent to the house for her that came with free chocolates. She really felt as if a new dawn had come, but in truth it was just a false spring, like the ones in January when the ground warms up and the snowdrops pop out, only for a winter frost to descend and kill them. It all started to slip back to how it was before when she was the only one making the effort in the relationship. And like a worm, in a part of her brain that she couldn't reach to excise it, sat the affair, always there, always hurting.

She told herself that if she still felt the same by the first of May, a year to the day since she moved back in, if his vow to make it all right hadn't come to fruition, then she'd ring the final bell, stupidly hoping that in the meantime, Chris would realize what was slipping away from him. He'd refused to talk things through, he wouldn't listen or change, so she'd kept her promise to herself and set her plan in motion. Then Camay had thrown a spanner in the works with this impulsively arranged wedding. Polly put everything on hold but it was a mere delay, not a cancellation. She had to leave. She felt herself becoming more and more transparent with every passing day, and if she didn't leave soon, there would be nothing left of her to go.

She had no doubt she would have to absorb the blame for the end of their relationship; Chris would mop up all available sympathy and portray himself as a saint worthy of his own stained-glass church window. People who knew him would be flabbergasted that she could leave such a hardworking, good-looking, well-minted family man as Chris Barrett. Was she bonkers? Chris was popular, well-liked, but he saved his best for others, not her.

No doubt Camay would have a lot to say about it and Ward would nod along in consensus. Chris's daughter Shauna would be the most vocal. She'd never liked her stepmother, despite every effort Polly had made to build a relationship with her. Will was a different kettle of fish, a kid with a lovely aura, and Polly liked being around him. She'd helped him with his A-levels when he was struggling and he'd sent her a beautiful thank-you notelet when he passed them all with flying colors. She'd kept it; it was now with the brooches in her handbag.

He and his father didn't have a lot of middle ground, and Chris had been a fool not to try to make some, she'd told him, though he hadn't listened to that either.

In her class that evening, Polly worked on the scene of the big marital split, when Sabrina tells Jasper it's all over. When he'd reneged on his promise not to stick his fingers in his ears and sing loud "la-las" whenever she wanted to talk emotions; when he continued to say that it was unreasonable for him to turn down work so they could go out for a meal or take a holiday; when sex was no longer a giving, sharing thing, but a taking, a mere scratching when an itch presented itself to him. Sabrina had given Jasper a full year to reform, and if anything, he'd gotten worse.

It was all so much easier when you could control the whole thing in your head, like both sides of a chess game. Not so much when playing with only the black pieces and trying to second-guess if the white pieces would erupt, implode, cry, or physically throw her out of the door when her queen checkmated his king.

## About the Author



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MILLY JOHNSON was born, raised and still lives in Barnsley, South Yorkshire. A *Sunday Times* bestseller, she is one of the Top 10 Female Fiction authors in the UK and has sold millions of copies of her books across the world. *The Accidental Rewrite* is her twenty-first novel.

Milly's writing highlights the importance of community spirit and the magic of kindness. Her books inspire and uplift, but she packs a punch and never shies away from the hard realities of life and the complexities of relationships in her stories. Her books champion women, their strength and resilience, and celebrate love, friendship, and the possibility and joy of second chances and renaissances.

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